



**U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom Hearing**

**Religious Minorities and Governance in Iraq**

December 7, 2023

*Opening Remarks as prepared for delivery*

**Frank Wolf, USCIRF Commissioner**

Thank you, Vice Chair Davie.

As my fellow Commissioners have pointed out, life in Iraq for the country's diverse religious minorities no longer involves the daily threat of the mass-scale atrocities that ISIS perpetrated during its terrible reign. However, as I witnessed with my own eyes during my travels to Iraq, these communities' continued existence in their ancestral homelands remains tenuous at best.

Religious and ethnic minorities such as Kaka'is, Shabaks, Sabaeen Mandeans, Yazidis, and members of the Assyrian, Chaldean and Syriac churches are indigenous to what is now modern Iraq. Yet, these are the very communities most

at risk of political and social marginalization and, potentially, total disappearance from Iraq. The Iraqi constitution sets forth freedom of religion and acknowledges the “administrative, political, cultural, and educational rights” of minorities, while the KRG has promoted its region as a safe haven for religious minorities. However, both the Iraqi federal government and the KRG have failed to consistently enforce these principles, prompting many Christians to leave the country. PMF brigades continue to target religious minorities for harassment at the militias’ many checkpoints. Neither the federal government nor the KRG reflect adequate political representation of religious minorities. Christians still have not seen the return of many properties appropriated during past periods of conflict, and they report ongoing employment and social discrimination.

On September 26 of this year, a few months after the government’s revocation of Cardinal Sako’s authority, a tragic wedding reception fire in the Nineveh province devastated the local Christian population, killing at least 130. This part of Iraq includes many survivors of ISIS’s campaign of terror against religious minorities, who had tried against heavy odds to rebuild their lives on their ancestral homelands. Such a tragedy further heightens the risk of traumatized residents emigrating from Iraq, fearing continued government inaction in response to the Christian community’s longstanding concerns.

Yazidis, too, are a community in crisis. Many Yazidis are rightfully afraid to return to Sinjar. Not only are its infrastructure, educational and employment opportunities still unsuitable, but governance deficits and competing militias have made Sinjar an ongoing security risk for Yazidi families. Additionally, USCIRF has continued to raise inquiries about the status of the almost 2,700 Yazidi women and girls still missing after ISIS kidnapped and sold them into slavery nine years ago.